



## KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

### Tribal chairman sees casino victory as path to homeland

Sunday, March 04, 2007

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D.K. Sprague plans to stand up in the sanctuary of the Bradley Indian Mission today to give fellow worshippers some good news.

The tribal chairman for the Gun Lake Band of Pottawatomi Indians says he will let church members know that the tribe's long battle to win the right to construct a gaming facility on 145 acres of land near U.S. 131 in Wayland Township could soon be over.

Depending on how a judge in Washington, D.C., rules this week, the tribe for the first time in its history could be awarded its own federally recognized homeland. Soon after that, construction could begin on a more than \$200 million casino.

But there is something else -- other than the economic boon the casino is expected to bring to his tribe -- on Sprague's mind.

The 63-year-old retired railroad conductor and Vietnam War veteran may or may not talk about it in church. This part is harder to put into words. It has to do with tribal history and memory.

It has to do with train whistles that used to blast through the Bradley Indian settlement, about baseball games played on hot summer afternoons, about church camp meetings, and about walking the same winding paths through the woods that lead from the Indian mission to the site where the tribe plans to build its gaming facility.

Mixing in with these good memories, however, is a troubling realization, Sprague says.

"This process (to win approval for a casino) started a long time ago with other folks," Sprague said in an interview on Friday.

On his mind and in his heart, he said, are the tribal elders who year after year supported the fight to regain a traditional homeland and have now "walked on (passed away) and won't able to see the fruits of their labors."

#### A long battle

Michigan Gambling Opposition (MichGO), an anti-gambling group, in June of 2005 sued the federal government to keep it from taking the land in Bradley into trust.

Then, after a U.S. District Court judge in Washington, D.C., recently issued a ruling that allowed the federal government to take the land in Bradley into trust, MichGO sent in another appeal.

That appeal is pending, but MichGO doesn't have much time, because the judge ruled that the Bradley land will become a recognized reservation at 5 p.m. Monday.

"It has been frustrating. We've done everything the federal government has asked of us," said John Shagonaby, the tribe's vice chairman. "They (MichGO) have only been trying to delay this as long as they can."

Once the land is put into a federal trust and becomes a recognized reservation, the tribe will need to work with Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who has expressed willingness to negotiate a gaming compact.

This compact will allow the tribe to offer a range of gambling games and at the same time require it to pay a certain portion of its revenue to the state.

### **A contested history**

Throughout the court case, MichGO has argued that the land for the casino is not really part of the tribe's traditional homeland.

But Sprague says this is a misreading of history.

After being moved from place to place from their original settlement in what is now downtown Kalamazoo, the tribe eventually settled in the 1830s in Bradley, under the arm and protection first of the Episcopal Church and then of the Methodist Church.

“The church has always been an integral part of our being together. We fell under the auspices of the church, and they took care of us well,” said Sprague, who was the youngest of 11 children born to Henry and Rose Sprague.

The church itself, which was built in the early 1900s, has served as a community and information center for members of the settlement.

“When the church bell was rung, it told the settlement of some news -- a birth, a death,” Sprague said.

While many members of the tribe no longer live near the church, they still worship, along with non-native people, at the Bradley Indian Mission, located at 695 128th Avenue. Not too far away is the Bradley Indian Cemetery.

The entire area is familiar to Sprague. He recalls walking the paths that led from the Bradley settlement to the site for what will be the casino. It was a two-mile hike.

He recalls how the train between Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids would roll through the area, blowing its whistle. He remembers how a worker on the train was a member of the Indian community and would shovel coal off onto the side of the tracks for tribe members to pick up to heat their homes, Sprague said.

Then there was the baseball team, coached by his father, that played in the area and took on teams from all over Michigan. Sprague played second base.

“It was fun. I was very fortunate to live in this area,” he said.

### **A new beginning**

The tribe first sought recognition from the federal government in 1939, before Sprague was born. It petitioned most recently in 1993, finally winning recognition in 1999, and has been struggling through two governors, numerous legislative fights and persistent legal battles to get to this point.

Now, he said, he and other members of the tribe may finally be able to feel some sense of permanence.

In the past, the government never abided by “our treaties,” he said. “If they had better use for the land, they ran us off.”

But once the land is in trust, that shouldn't happen.

Tribal members who scattered to other states for various reasons over the years will be able to return and work. Then they can become more active and intimate members of the tribe.

The casino will offer about 1,800 jobs in what once was the Ampro Industries plant. Proceeds from the casino, which will feature Las Vegas-style entertainment, card games and slot machines, will be used to pay for housing, health care, education and preservation of tribal customs and language.

“The casino will be the catalyst for jobs. People have been waiting in the wings for jobs to come,” said Sprague.

Beyond that, said Sprague, his biggest hope that tribal elders who are getting up there in age will be able to hang on awhile longer “so that they can see the shovel going into the ground and the doors (of the new casino) opening.”